Semiotics for Beginners

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D.I.Y. Semiotic Analysis: Advice to My Own Students

Semiotics can be applied to anything which can be seen as signifying something. Even within the context of the mass media you can apply semiotic analysis to any media texts, including television and radio programmes, films, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, posters and other ads. I strongly recommend detailed comparison and contrast of paired media texts dealing with a similar topic: this is a lot easier than trying to analyse a single text. It may also help to use a good example of semiotic analysis by an experienced practitioner as a model for your own analysis. John Fiske offers a valuable account of 'semiotic methods and applications' (Fiske 1982, 103-117).

- Wherever possible, include a copy of the sign with your analysis of it, noting any significant shortcomings of the copy. Where including a copy is not practicable, offer a clear description of the sign which would allow someone to recognize it easily if they encountered it themselves. Briefly describe the genre to which it belongs and the context in which it was found.
- What are the important signifiers and what do they signify?
  - What is the system within which these signs make sense?
- Paradigmatic analysis
  - To which class of paradigms (medium; genre; theme) does the whole text belong?
  - How might a change of medium affect the meanings generated?
  - What might the text have been like if it had formed part of a different genre?
  - What paradigms are noticeably absent?
  - What paired opposites seem to be involved (e.g. nature/culture)?
  - Is there a central opposition in the text?
  - What connotative meanings do such paradigmatic structures suggest?
  - Apply the commutation test in order to identify distinctive paradigms and to define their significance. This involves an imagined substitution of one paradigm for another of your own, and assessing the effect.
- What is the syntagmatic structure of the text?
  - How does one unit (e.g. a film shot) relate to the others used?

- How does the sequential or spatial arrangement of the elements influence meaning?
- Are there formulaic features that have shaped the text?
- How far does identifying the paradigms and syntagms help you to understand the text?

- Metaphors and metonyms
  - What metaphors and metonyms are involved?
  - How are they used to influence the preferred reading?
- Intertextuality
  - Does it allude to other genres?
  - Does it allude to or compare with other *texts* within the genre?
  - How does it compare with treatments of similar *themes* within other genres?
  - Does one code within the text (such as a linguistic caption to an advertisement or news photograph) serve to 'anchor' another (such as an image)? If so, how?
- What semiotic codes are used?
  - Do the codes have double, single or no articulation?
  - Are the codes *analogue* or *digital*?
  - Which conventions of its *genre* are most obvious in the text?
  - Which codes are *specific* to the medium?
  - Which codes are *shared* with other media?
  - How do the codes involved relate to each other (e.g. words and images)?
  - Are the codes *broadcast* or *narrowcast?*
  - What cultural assumptions are called upon?
  - To whom would these codes be most familiar?
  - What seems to be the *preferred reading?*
  - How far does this reflect or depart from dominant cultural values?
  - How 'open' to interpretation does the sign seem to be?
- *Social semiotics*
  - What does a purely structural analysis of the text downplay or ignore?
  - Who created the sign?
  - For whom was it intended?
  - How do people differ in their interpretation of the sign?
  - On what do their interpretations seem to depend?
- Benefits of semiotic analysis
  - What other contributions have semioticians made that can be applied productively to the text?
  - What insights has a semiotic analysis of this text offered?

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